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Humanoids and Anomalous Lights: Taxonomic and Epistemological Problems

In addressing a problem which is at once taxonomic and epistemological it is not my intention to either add new definitions to those already found in the field of folklore nor to focus more sharply those now present in the field. In fact my intention is almost the opposite. I wish to add a new dimension, and perhaps new subcategories, to a group of definitions already in existence. This group consists of what we may generally term "belief materials". This would include such terms as "belief", "legend" and "memorate". These are materials which, whatever other elements might be present in their definition would be said by most to "be believed" by informants. This element is generally considered to be definitive. What is not stated, but which seems to be equally important, is that the collector and/or analyst who examines the belief material once it has been captured in the field, does n o t believe it. This would appear to distinguish, for example, the statement that certain kinds of deviant behavior are caused by spirit possession, from the statement that some of the determinants of chronic schizophrenia are genetic. When I attempt to give medical students examples of the beliefs, attitudes and practices that make up our Western, orthodox health system as opposed to a local folk or popular health system, I am frequently asked such questions as "But that's not a belief is it? That's actually true." Unfortunately this also appears to be the sort of distinction many folklorists implicitly employ in looking at belief materials: "What I know is knowledge; what they know is belief."

Herein lies a major taxonomic inadequacy. In certain subject areas we have categories of statements and narratives (primarily beliefs, legends and memorates) held by the scholar to be untrue, prima facie; for example in the area of unexplained lights and humanoids. However, in other areas we have similar categories considered likely to be true (for example recipes — we do not state that the Pennsylvania Dutch b e l i e v e pot pie to be made mostly of homemade noodles and chicken stock), but when such materials prove to be incorrect we use only those categories normally found in our language (such as "mistakes" or "bad recipes"). In the first case objective inaccuracy is taken to be a definitive characteristic, while in the second objective accuracy is considered descriptive.

This inadequacy imposes upon us a set of blinders which are derived from our assumptive set or, as Thomas Kuhn puts it in describing "normal science"

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and its revolutions, "paradigms"[1]. Paradigms are not simply theories or aggregates of theories. They are much more powerful than that. They specify not only suggested answers to questions already posed, but also indicate what kinds of questions may legitimately be asked and what kinds of answers may be considered acceptable. Their tyranny is the greater, then, in that they make certain lines of inquiry very difficult to think of in the first place, let alone to objectively consider.

It would seem, then, that we are faced with two alternatives. We may construct for each of the categories of belief materials two subcategories, the one composed of apparently accurate descriptions of real events, and the other of apparently inaccurate descriptions or descriptions with no real referents. Or, and I greatly prefer this option, we may make the element of liklihood or objective accuracy a descriptive rather than a definitive one. We may then, if we wish, arrive at this descriptive element by comparing an informant's belief to our own world view; for example, "My informant believes that there are lights in the sky which cannot be accounted for by any known scientific explanation, but I do not believe this". Or we may attempt to arrive at this element through actual research. But whichever approach we decide to take it will at least be likely that all of the pertinent questions can occur. If we adopt this approach it means that we will not only have legends and memorates about incredibly strong men, ghosts, inexplicable lights and huge, hair covered bipeds; but also about mundane phenomena and experiences, so long as the item and its context fits the rest of our definitions of the category — and it is not my intention now to enter into a discussion of other definitive features.

The importance of this change in our orientation to certain kinds of materials in terms of the epistemological systems of our informants can be well illustrated in the case of accounts of large hair-covered bipeds. These have been variously called abominable snowmen, wild men, sasquatch and so forth. For convenience I shall here use the term "ABSM", an abbreviation for abominable snowman now frequently encountered in popular literature and generally employed without any necessary connotation of connection with a particular habitat (e.g., snow), or part of the world. Major interest in such creatures first entered printed traditions in the Western world as a result of observations made by Lt.-Col. Howard Bury in 1921 during a British attempt to climb Mount Everest. Following the failure of his expedition Bury mentioned in a news conference that he and one of his sherpas has seen a large animal walking upright across the snows at 16,000 feet. A reporter who was struck by the account inquired into local tradition and discovered a wide-spread Himalayan set of beliefs about large, fur covered man-like animals living at great heights in the mountains. Apparently his mistranslation of the Nepalese word "Kang-Mi", which refers to the creature's preference

[1] Kuhn, T. S.: The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Chicago 1970, passim.

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for high altitudes, led to the appellation "abominable". If this etymology of the term abominable snowman is correct, it is interesting to note that many of the reports of such creatures since, especially in North America, refer to a very strong and unpleasant smell which could easily justify the insult. Since that time, of course, many more reports of sightings and investigations have come from the mountainous area of Asia.

More useful for our purposes are the reports in North America. Most people have heard of the West Coast "Sasquatch", and some serious expeditions have been mounted to determine for certain whether there is some sort of real animal behind the stories. What is less commonly known is that there have been reports of giant hair-covered bipeds from every state of the U.S. and from every province of Canada. And many of these sightings come from heavily settled areas quite unlike the mountain fastnesses the Sasquatch is believed to frequent. An example of this distribution was provided by the numerous newspaper stories which appeared a few summers ago concerning a rash of such reports and the resulting panic in Missouri where the creature was dubbed "Mo-Mo". This was simply one of the better publicized examples.

During the four years (1971—1974) that I spent teaching in the Folklore Department at Memorial University in Newfoundland I was able to gather a number of accounts of such creatures in Newfoundland and Labrador[2], none of which had been publicized by the newspapers as far as I could discover. The oldest was from the late nineteenth century in Labrador and was contained in an old travel book[3]. The incident was referred to as "the Traverspine gorilla", Traverspine being the name of the settlement where most of the action took place. The author stated that one afternoon a young girl was playing in front of her parents' cabin when she saw a large animal covered with short white fur, walking erect and appearing to have practically no neck, come out of the forest and start toward her. She very reasonably ran screaming into the house where her mother barred the door and the creature went away. However, it returned at night and walked around the cabin beating on the walls, apparently with a branch or other piece of wood. During the following days the men of the area tracked it, hoping to shoot it. They claimed to have seen it at a distance several times, but never got a clear shot at it. For some time it continued to come back at night, frightening the inhabitants of the community, and then at length it simply disappeared. The local people explained it as being a gorilla which had somehow found its way into the local forest, hence the term "Traverspine gorilla".

[2] All of the Newfoundland material referred to in this paper is either from the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive or from the author's field work.

[3] A fragment of this book containing the summarized account was read by the author in the Memorial University Archive referred to above. Unfortunately not enough of the book survived to make it possible to give author, title, and exact date, although it may be possible eventually to find an entire copy which will allow complete citation.

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A more recent account from the island of Newfoundland was collected by a University student from his grandfather, one of the principals in the story. A number of men had gone to an isolated part of Trinity Bay (a very large bay on the north side of the island) and set up a temporary camp from which they were going out in their boats to fish. This was in the early part of this century. Upon returning to the camp in the evening they repeatedly found it in disarray as if violently ransacked, although nothing was ever missing. They explained this as "Indian trouble", although by that time there had been no indigenous Indians known on the island for the better part of a century, and the area frequented by Micmacs from Nova Scotia was several hundred miles away. It is, in fact, very unlikely that any of the men had ever seen an Indian, or perhaps even a picture of one. Some time after the trouble began the men were coming in to shore at a point down the coast from the camp when they saw what they called "two Indians" sitting on a log. Assuming that these were the troublemakers they ruthlessly took the law into their own hands and fired on the two as they ran for the woods. They did shoot and kill one. They described this dead "Indian" as being 7 feet tall, covered with short reddish brown fur and wearing no clothes. There was no room to put the corpse in the boat so they towed it behind with a rope, taking it to their home community where they buried it after showing it to others in the community. As a result, the spot where the killing took place is now called Red Indian Point.

The other accounts which I collected were primarily encounters between individual hunters or trappers and ABSM's in which the men felt threatened and shot the creature. None of these were firsthand accounts. These contained no further elaboration and the term usually applied was simply "a big hairy man". A somewhat different account of considerable interest came from two residents of the community on the edge of the wilderness across the harbor from St. John's, the provincial capitol. These middle aged men said that they had been told by their parents that large hairy, man-like creatures lived in the woods and that they communicated with one another by whistling. It was further stated that they were shy and would not harm people if left alone.

To me there are several very striking things about this material. First of all the descriptions of the creatures as to height, shortness of neck and range of behavior (including whistling for communication which has been reported on the West Coast) fit perfectly with other descriptions from other parts of the continent. Secondly, none of the informants showed any awareness of reports from elsewhere or used such terms as sasquatch or abominable snowman. In fact they did not have any specific term at all to apply to the creatures. Related to this point is the fact that the accounts were devoid of elaboration, or allusions to any other traditional material. In this respect the accounts are very thoroughly different from, for example, the accounts of fairies which may still be collected in Newfoundland. When looked at in terms of what we expect from materials that represent a stream of oral

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tradition, these accounts have more the appearance of simple statements of actual observations.

In considering the possibility that such accounts do refer to real phenomena it is interesting to note that in Europe very similar creatures have been reported at least since the Middle Ages. Bernheimer has documented much of this material in an excellent book entitled *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*[4]. Although the book treats the subject as a purely fictitious one, mainly from the standpoint of art history and heraldry, it does contain some material which might be construed as supporting the objective reality of ABSMs. First of all the descriptions of the creatures tally perfectly with the modern descriptions. For example, the shortness of neck is so striking that some of the artistic representations show a creature which is headless and has facial features on the upper part of its chest. Also of interest are the Medieval traditions about these creatures: namely that they were men disappointed in chivalric love who, insane with desperation went into the forest where their wild habits and livelihood led them to grow fur and lose their facility for speech; it was believed that if these men were captured, forced to wear clothing, eat with a knife and fork and attend church, the fur would drop off and they would recover their senses and speech. Most intriguing is the fact that in very few accounts of such efforts, none of them that I have read, is any success reported. The creatures typically either remain somewhat ferocious exhibits, or pine away and die in captivity. This is not generally the pattern in narratives found accompanying a set of beliefs. Ordinarily the narratives in tradition will support the beliefs. Again there is the suspicion raised that there may have been an actual phenomenon somewhat obscured by traditions surrounding it.

At all events, given the remarkable consistency of details across space and time, if we can bring ourselves to consider all possibilities (including the possibility that informants who report first-hand encounters with these creatures may be honest, sane and capable of recognizing the difference between the local fauna and what they say they have seen) we are faced with two possible explanations. Either there is an ancient tradition of such creatures which has been far more persistent, widespread and conservative than anyone has seriously considered; or the accounts are based on an objectively real referent, sometimes embedded in a tradition and sometimes not, perhaps depending on the frequency of sightings in a given place and time.

I would guess that most folklorists would consider this general subject perfectly legitimate as soon as oral sources have been added to the printed ones which are better known, and this can very easily be done in the U.S. as well as in Canada. But when the possibility is raised that these accounts may actually refer to simple facts accurately reported many may question whether this is still a folklore topic rather than the domain of zoology. I would answer definitely yes for several reasons. First, if we are willing to

[4] Bernheimer, R.: Wild Men in the Middle Ages. Cambridge 1952.

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accept accurate folk knowledge concerning how to build a barn or the uses of local herbs or the habits of ordinary local animals as folk l o r e, then we should have no problem accepting accurate knowledge concerning extra-ordinary animals as folk l o r e, when it exists in tradition as it does in many parts of North America. But even when such knowledge does not appear to be a part of tradition, as in Newfoundland, I would submit that a folklorist is much better equipped than a zoologist to attempt educated guesses at how such information may be interpreted and even how to gather it. At least it must be a joint enterprise, i f — and this is very important "if" — serious and openminded folklore research seems to indicate that there is a genuine zoological component of some sort. If there is not then we shall have reestablished contact with a fascinating and ancient body of purely traditional material. But if we discover a need for zoological collaboration it would not be the first time that such a change in the classification of reported phenomena has taken place. Meteorites, giant squid and the African gorilla are only a few of the many examples of kinds of reports which scientists classed as folklore first, and as scientific facts later. The greater respect of folklorists for informants and their hopefully greater ability to analyze verbal reports could probably have greatly increased the speed with which science came sensibly to grips with those phenomena. Similar possibilities may well still exist — but they can only be grasped if we do not permit an incomplete taxonomy based largely on our understanding of the current limits of knowledge to prevent us from considering all logical possibilities in our analysis. If we immediately conclude that the persistence of ABSM material may be adequately explained either in terms of archetypes or sexual fantasies we may be guilty of the same kind of embarassing error which led 18th century astronomers to explain that the farmers who claimed that hot boulders had fallen into their fields had simply not noticed a partially buried metallic rock until it was struck by lightning. They satisfied themselves in this way without even visiting the site. After all, there were no rocks i n the sky and hence none could fall from it. Of course this showed very little respect for the farmer since it required him to plow the field for years without previously noting the presence of the rock. If we say that a hunter cannot recognize a bear when he sees one or that he has obviously lied, we are guilty of the same sloppiness u n t i l we can actually support our statement with careful documentation.

A very similar situation exists in the case of lights in the sky, although I cannot go into it at length here. But again the Newfoundland material supports the contention of continuity from past to present[5]. Traditionally lights

[5] In considering the question of such continuity the subject is considerably confused by an extensive popular literature. A large number of authors of this literature have taken positions which are both extreme and silly. Since these are actually the best known, there is some danger that their work will give the scholar the impression that there is no point in considering substantial connections between older folk traditions and modern belief materials such as UFO's and ABSM's,

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in Newfoundland have been called, primarily, either weather lights or Jack-O-Lanterns, depending on whether they were over water or land. Some of the Jack-O-Lantern accounts are quite identical to UFO accounts except for the terms applied. There is, for example, one from early in this century in which a couple in a horse drawn wagon observed the light passing over head. As it passed, the trees moved as if in a high wind although there was none, and while the light was over the road the horse stopped until the Jack-O-Lantern had reached the other side. Then he proceeded again at a normal pace. Those of you familiar with modern UFO accounts will recognize the parallels, although the stopping of the horse cannot be explained as ignition failure as it usually is today in accounts involving cars. It is interesting to note too that in the past few years there have been sightings of lights over some Newfoundland communities in reference to which many of the older residents have continued to use the term Jack-O-Lantern while most of the younger people now call them UFOs.

Both of these topics: humanoids of various kinds and apparently inexplicable lights, are extremely complicated. Both in tradition and in the investigations of modern scientists such as J. Allen Hynek of Northwestern University Observatory[6], each topic seems to contain a very substantial variety of phenomena. The entire matter becomes still more complicated when we face the fact that frequently, though by no means always, the two sets of phenomena appear together: ABSMs and UFOs are frequently sighted in close temporal and geographic proximity today and traditional accounts of such connections are also available.

If we are to approach these very important modern oral traditions sensibly we must do so with a strong foundation of knowledge concerning related materials from the past. We must also do this with respect for our informants and a taxonomy which does not mistake our own epistemological systems for objective reality, nor those of our informants for a prelogical dream world where subject and object cannot be distinguished. On the other hand, in her article *The 'Belief Legend' in Modern Society* Linda Dégh[7] has pointed out very nicely the way in which C. G. Jung found UFO material suitable for analysis because of its great popularity, regardless of whether the accounts caused or were caused by the phenomenon. This can also be a valid position for folklorists provided they carefully consider the nature of both their questions and

except as an additional category of modern belief. For an excellent counter-argument to such a conclusion see: Vallee, J.: Passport to Magonia. From Folklore to Flying Saucers. Chicago 1974. Vallee, who has excellent credentials both as a scientist and a serious researcher into UFO matters, has provided a book which any folklorist interested in belief materials should find very interesting.

[6] Hynek was officially connected with the Air Force investigation of UFO's (Project Blue Book) and has written a number of excellent books on the subject. An interesting recent update is: Vallee, J./Hynek, J. A.: The Edge of Reality: A Progress Report on Unidentified Flying Objects. Chicago 1975.

[7] In: Hand, W. D. (ed.): American Folk Legend. A Symposium (UCLA Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology 2). Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1971, 55—68.

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their assumptions. When a UFO "flap" spreads across hundreds of miles in a matter of hours the question "How could a rumor spread so quickly?" is of great importance if no inexplicable lights were seen, but is meaningless if they were; whereas the question "Why are so many who never claim to have seen a saucer believers in and spreaders of narratives and beliefs about them?" is valid whatever the objective nature of the phenomenon.

In closing there is one other logical error to which folklorists and other scholars all too often fall prey when considering belief materials, and which is relevant to the ABSM and UFO material. This is the discounting of the possible objective reality of a phenomenon because it is accompanied, either in tradition or the account of the informant, by an unacceptable explanation. For example, the statement that UFO's are spaceships and ABSM's are their occupants may well accompany or even replace an informant's report of having heard recent stories of lights in the sky and having personally seen a large hairy biped. The former is an interpretation which may well derive totally from tradition while the latter is an alleged observation which may or may not come from tradition. Obviously most informants will not make statements with a high degree of phenomenological clarity. Therefore our assessment of likelihood (where appropriate), as well as our need for data relevant to a wide variety of linguistic and cultural questions, requires that we carefully distinguish between interpretation and observation in belief materials.

As soon as we become truly careful about our logic and our understanding of our own assumptive sets we shall be able to begin to work seriously with a huge body of material of great importance within our culture, and to do so in ways that promise a variety of very exciting possibilities.

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